

Approval of development on Queen W. draws fire

VAL ROSS

In a decision that was swiftly criticized as harming an affordable neighbourhood that harbours numerous galleries and artists' studios, the Ontario Municipal Board has ruled in favour of a high-rise residential project in the Queen West Triangle.

The OMB was expected to post its decision on three appeals for high-rise residential construction today. For those who have defended the area's distinctive mix of low-rise Victorian architecture, affordable housing, art galleries and small businesses, the decision (made known on Friday afternoon to the OMB, city and neighbourhood lawyers) comes as bad news.

"This is a linchpin decision," said financier and urban activist David Pecaut, chair of the Toronto City Summit Alliance. "It could affect land adjacent to the train tracks from Queen West all the way to Bloor." Because it will displace small creative industries, the closely watched decision could also tarnish Toronto's image as a creative, arts-friendly city.

The decision will open the way for a 19-storey condo building; an 18-storey building at 48 Abell St., which developers have said will offer affordable housing, pending their application for government grants; one 15-storey condo; one 14-storey condo; and three eight-storey buildings. In all, around 1,500 new units will bring at least 2,000 more people into the area.

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In an e-mail sent Friday evening to neighbourhood-preservation groups, including the Active 18 coalition, activist Margie Zeidler, wrote: "Queen Street West will now become a bunch of condo

towers . . . even if artists could afford to stay [in the neighbourhood] they will not -- because it will be soon become a crummy mono-culture . . . Basically the developers got everything they wanted. I am truly shocked."

In effect, the OMB, a quasi-judicial agency, has final say over Ontario developments.

"In theory, you can appeal," the Active 18 coalition's lawyer, Charles Campbell, told The Globe and Mail. "In practice, the courts won't listen unless there has been a clear legal error."

Active 18 will hold a press conference tomorrow.

It's not over yet, according to Don Wanagas, director of communications for Mayor David Miller. Reached at his home, he said, "We're concerned about the decision and we're having everyone, our planning and our legal people -- look at it. There's still room for negotiations."

But Ken Greenberg, a noted urban designer, observed, "Once the OMB has ruled, there's nothing for the developers to do but savour their victory."

The decision overrides what city planners have said they wanted for the neighbourhood.

"We've spent a lot of time on this at the OMB hearings. We're really worried about displacing the artists," Lynda Macdonald, area planner for the city, told The Globe last Thursday.

The decision also appears to contradict the urgings of a \$600,000 report unveiled in July by the mayor and Tourism Minister Jim Bradley.

"Imagine a Toronto . . . Strategies for a Creative City" argued that cities need affordable neighbourhoods as incubation spaces for culture and entrepreneurship.